BEHAVIORAL OBJECTIVES

AFTER READING THIS NEWSLETTER THE LEARNER WILL BE ABLE TO:

1. Describe typical age-specific pain responses and barriers to management in the elderly.
2. Discuss implications for the healthcare provider related to pain in the elderly.

Pain is experienced by patients of all ages. Over 34 million Americans - aging adults, adults, adolescents and children, suffer from pain. Certain types of pain are more common in certain age-groups. Chronic pain is more common in aging adults. Several recent studies have cited that at least 70% of all persons over 65 years of age experience non-cancerous chronic pain. In the U.S, about 2/3 of elderly people take prescription analgesics for greater than 6 months. In the elderly, the most common causes of pain are musculoskeletal disorders, such as arthritis and neuralgia.

This newsletter will describe pain and typical age-specific pain responses, as well as barriers to pain management in the elderly. Implications for the healthcare provider, related to pain in the elderly, will also be discussed.

PAIN

There is no simple definition of pain. Pain is whatever the person experiencing the pain says it is, existing whenever the patient says it does. Because pain is an individual experience, patient self reporting is the single most reliable indicator of the existence and intensity of pain. However, this can cause challenges in pain assessment in elderly patients who have sensory or cognitive changes common with aging.

Tolerance to pain varies from person to person, and from time to time in the same person. Regardless of the cause, pain as the person perceives it, is what must be managed. The individual who is experiencing the pain is the judge of the severity of pain, and the relief of pain. The painful event alone or the perception of the healthcare provider, for example to a procedure - “That shouldn’t have hurt that badly”, is never an appropriate measure of pain, regardless of the patient’s age.

PAIN IN THE ELDERLY

Certain types of pain are more common in certain age-groups. Chronic pain, continuous or regularly occurring pain, that extends over a period of 6 months or longer, is more common in aging adults. Older adults often suffer from more than one chronic condition, therefore, they may feel pain in more than one area of the body at the same time. One study cited that at least 70% of all persons over 65 years of age experience noncancerous chronic pain, primarily due to osteoarthritis and neuralgia. Acute pain, from tissue damage caused by disease, injury, surgery or other invasive procedures, is common in all populations. It is relatively short-lived and can range in intensity from extreme to tolerable.

Unrelieved pain is so common among older adults that it is often accepted by this age-group. Unfortunately, it is also viewed as inevitable by healthcare providers and family members. Persistent pain interferes with activities of daily living and quality of life. However, detection and management of pain in this population remains inadequate. For example, nearly 500,000 older adults die from cancer each year, many of whom experience inadequate treatment of malignant pain before their death. Every patient, regardless of age or circumstances, has the right to be pain free.

There is no evidence that elderly persons perceive pain differently from younger persons. Yet, lack of adequate and appropriate management of pain is a common occurrence in older adults. Many older adults, their family members, as well as healthcare providers believe pain is a natural occurrence with aging. Although the prevalence of persistent pain does increase with age, unrelieved pain is not an expectation of normal aging. Although aging adults are not less sensitive to pain, they do generally report pain less often than adults or adolescents, for a number of reasons.

AGE-SPECIFIC PAIN RESPONSES & BARRIERS TO ASSESSMENT & MANAGEMENT:

Although pain is a subjective and a personal experience, patients in various age-groups have characteristic responses to pain. The elderly often refer to experiencing pain as “better than the alternative” - death. The elderly may also not report pain, fearing it indicates a terminal illness. While chronic pain is common among the elderly, unrelieved pain is not a result of normal aging. Although aging adults are not less sensitive to pain, they do generally report pain less often than adults or adolescents, for a number of reasons.

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POPCULATION/AGE-SPECIFIC EDUCATION POST TEST

GROWING NUMBERS...
Caring for Ambulatory Surgery Patients

Sample 2011

Competency: Demonstrates Age-Specific Competency by correctly answering 9 out of 10 questions related to Age-Specific Responses... The Elderly.

AGE-SPECIFIC RESPONSES... THE ELDERLY

1. Pain is whatever the person experiencing the pain says it is, existing whenever he or she says it does.
   a. True
   b. False

2. A 79 year old man is to undergo a bone marrow aspiration. Local analgesia has been injected at the site. Once the procedure begins the patient screams continuously. The healthcare professional should:
   a. tell the patient the procedure will be over soon and so will his pain.
   b. ask a family member to hold his hand, since the patient is experiencing acute pain.
   c. explain to the patient that he shouldn’t be in that much pain.
   d. advocate for the patient and request that additional analgesia be given.

3. Elderly patients, who are in pain, are NOT likely to:
   a. fear that pain indicates the worsening of their condition and possible death.
   b. have little self-control when responding to pain.
   c. accept pain as inevitable and that nothing can be done to control it.
   d. view having pain as better than dying.

4. Pain is a natural occurrence with aging.
   a. True
   b. False

5. The most reliable indicator of the existence of pain in an communicative elderly patient is a family member’s report of pain in the patient.
   a. True
   b. False

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